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DE RUEHUL #2432/01 2010735
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P 200735Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9209
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0968
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1044
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002432

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)

SUBJECT: 2007 ROK PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS - ALREADY THE TALK
OF THE TOWN

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Seventeen months before the December 2007 presidential elections, political pundits are already gauging every political act by how much it will affect the presidential race. The Grand National Party (GNP) elected Kang Jae-sup as its new party Chairman at the July 11 GNP convention. Many view this election as a proxy war for the GNP presidential nomination between leading hopefuls - former GNP Chairwoman Park Geun-hye and former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak. Kang's victory is seen as a victory for Park, who supports Kang. Observers believe that if Park can sustain her current level of popularity, and the Uri Party continues to disappoint the public, she could become the next ROK president. Many in the Uri Party and the Democratic Party (DP) have called for a coalition in an effort to get another Uri member in the Blue House. "Who will be the next President?" is the only question worth asking as the Korean people wait out the Roh government, already in death thralls with low approval ratings, no prospects, and less hope. END SUMMARY

KANG'S VICTORY - A VICTORY FOR PARK GEUN-HYE?

¶2. (C) On July 11, conservative Rep. Kang Jae-sup won the GNP Chairman election at the GNP convention. Kang represents the old guard of the GNP and his background in the prosecutor's office leads many to believe his leadership will signal a further shift right by the GNP. See septel for more details about July 11 election and the new GNP Supreme Council.

¶3. (C) Many see Rep. Kang Jae-sup's victory as an indicator that Park has a firm lead on the GNP presidential nomination. Pessimists however, believe it signals a retreat by the GNP to its conservative traditions. While many in the GNP base approve of this retrenchment, as it signals a return to stability, others worry that national appeal will be difficult to obtain with an overly conservative Supreme Council. One of the "Young Turks" of the GNP, Choung Byoung-gug, expressed dismay at the election of Kang. He noted that, "with an overly conservative Council, it will be impossible to reform the GNP as needed to create national appeal." While his concerns were echoed by many in the party, newly elected Supreme Council member Chun Yu-ok and confidant of Park Geun-hye, said she was not "for" Park Geun-hye but for the party (GNP) and therefore would be a

voice for change on the Council.

¶4. (C) Since suffering a knife attack while campaigning for the local elections, Park Geun-hye's popularity has continued to soar and observers believe it was the Park Geun-hye "influence" which led to Kang's victory. According to one GNP official, before Park publicly signaled her support for Kang, he trailed Rep. Lee Jae-oh, while after her announcement, the party's support shifted strongly in favor of Rep. Kang. If Park can sustain her popularity and if the current 15% approval rating of the Roh government continues, some judge that Park would be a shoo-in for the presidency in ¶2007. But there are of course big ifs.

POSSIBLE PITFALL: A GNP SPLIT?

¶5. (C) Many analysts judge that if the GNP splits as it did in 1997, there will be no way to beat the Uri Party candidate, no matter who it may be, despite the overwhelming victory in the May 31 regional elections in which the GNP won 11 of 16 main local races in the May 31 local elections, including the Seoul mayor's race. Early speculations are emerging that with the ascendancy of Park Geun-hye, it increases the chances that former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak will split off from the GNP to form a new political party. This is, however, more difficult now, because after the 1997 presidential race the National Assembly passed a law preventing a candidate from running for president with a new/different party if they declare their candidacy with one party first, as Rhee In-jae did in 1997, assuring Kim Dae-jung's election. Therefore, for Lee to break from the GNP, he will have to do it before the primary season starts, possibly as early as this fall. Interestingly, if Lee wins the GNP primary, it is widely acc

epted that Park will support his candidacy. One optimistic GNP official noted that, "if Park and Lee stay together, they can not be beat!"

¶6. (C) A conservative victory in 2007 is by no means the consensus among politicians. According to leading political thinker, Korea University Professor Lee Na-Young, the GNP's Supreme Council's makeup could lead to a Uri Party victory in ¶2007. He emphasized the sweeping GNP victory in the May 31 local elections did not signal that the Korean people were getting more conservative, but rather that they were dissatisfied with the current leadership. At root, he said, Korean people favor change and reform. They also want a new approach from politicians and a "new" candidate reflecting "new" politics for their president. For this reason among others, Roh Moo-hyun won the 2002 presidential election. By this same logic, if the Uri Party can find a candidate with public appeal, they have a strong chance for victory. Currently, Lee and former Gyeong Gi Province governor Sohn Hak-kyu are pushing for the GNP to follow the Uri Party and have open primaries to choose the presidential candidate. The GNP nomination

process is a one-day convention style process where the power of choice lies predominantly with party officials. Professor Lee noted the open primary system would favor Lee and Sohn, but also would favor the GNP as it would lead logically to the choice of a candidate with broader appeal built up during the primary process.

URI PARTY - A POSSIBLE COALITION?

¶7. (C) The Uri Party at this point does not seem to have a popular candidate for president comparable to former Seoul Mayor Lee and Chairwoman Park. While some party officials are behind party chairman Kim Geun-tae and others hope former PM Goh Kun could be recruited as the Uri candidate, if the Uri Party does not find a new face that can distance him/herself from the current administration, observers are pessimistic about a Uri victory in 2007.

18. (C) Many in the Uri Party and Democratic Party (DP) are pushing publicly for a united Uri-DP coalition under a new party name. DP Chairman Hahn Hwa-gap has publicly expressed his desire to merge with the Uri Party. Hahn's aides and other DP lawmakers have expressed to poloff on numerous occasions their confidence that a united DP-Uri with former PM Goh Kun as their candidate could lead to victory for them in 2007.

COMMENT

19. (C) South Korean obsession with elections is perhaps surprising as it has been less than twenty years since the Republic has had open electoral contests. Also important is the enormous power exercised by the presidency. The president appoints the prime minister, cabinet and key law enforcement officials, including the chief prosecutor, Supreme Court judges, and high tax officials. Traditionally, South Korean presidents have exercised all their prerogatives with zeal and gusto, often excessively. Their single term of five years also means that presidents in Korea do not have to worry about the electorate again, because there's no reelection. So, just like the ubiquitous historical dramas on TV, South Koreans are preparing to watch for the next seventeen months another chapter of how kings are made. END

COMMENT

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